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SUBJECT: IRAQI OFFICIALS ON MALIKI'S BASRAH CAMPAIGN

Classified By: POL-MIL MINISTER-COUNSELOR MARCIE B. RIES, REASONS 1.4(B)
) AND (D)

¶1. (C) In a series of March 30 conversations with Iraqi officials including Ali Merza, Director of the National Security Advisor's Joint Planning Committee (JPC), Saïd Jaber from the Crisis Action Cell (CAC) secretariat, and A'amer Al- Musawi, chief of staff to the National Security Advisor (protect all), each related to PolMilOff his understanding of the genesis of Prime Minister Maliki's aggressive military intervention in Basrah. Each of these long-time embassy contacts is a technocrat responsible for interagency operations and planning within the GOI.

¶2. (C) These officials, in separate conversations, explained that the current large-scale operations in Basrah developed out of long-term efforts to redevelop the port of Umm Qasr. The Prime Minister was seeking to jump-start investment and development in Basrah and the Iraqi economy as a whole by focusing on the port, a key hub for trade and a source of jobs. A GOI delegation led by DPM Barham Salih visited Umm Qasr on February 26 to assess its potential and necessary improvements. Some members of the delegation, including NSA Rubaie, were unsettled by the extent of criminal militias (under the Sadrism banner if not his influence) at Umm Qasr.

¶3. (C) This led to a plan for the PM to personally intervene in Basrah in order to rid it of the corruption and end the hold of criminal groups in control of Umm Qasr port. Once Umm Qasr was stabilized, the Ministry of the Interior was to take responsibility for the port's security and the Ministry of Transportation was to be in charge of the port's operations.

¶4. (C) The second part of the plan was to exploit the media in order to win support for the central government. Heavy coverage of PM visits to the port, surrounding neighborhoods, and residential areas would have shown the PM disbursing jobs and economic development to the people as a gift from the government.

¶5. (C) Based on advice from the Prime Minister's advisors (the officials mentioned Minister of State for National Security Affairs Shirwan al-Waili and Yasin Majid, the PM's Media Advisor), who provided him with a list of 500 targets to purge the province of, the plan was altered from a limited security operation focused on the port of Umm Qasr to a major security operation throughout the city of Basrah. In the opinion of the officials who spoke with us, this led to the intensive military campaign.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The significance of Maliki's campaign in Basrah and the violence it ignited is still a matter of debate throughout political circles in Baghdad. The dust has not settled yet and it is quite possible that the views of

these and other officials regarding the wisdom of Maliki's course of action may shift significantly in coming days, weeks, and months.

17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Plans for provincial elections by October as well as the impending possibility that provinces can apply for permission to become 'regions' beginning in April may have been factors in the PM's decision to focus attention on Basrah when he did. It is also possible that security conditions had deteriorated in the months since security control had been relinquished by Coalition Forces in December 2007. In any case, Maliki's long-running feud with Basrah Governor al-Waili (Fadhila) was a contributing factor in how events played out, leading Maliki in the direction of forceful action undertaken without provincial government coordination, an action which in hindsight was foreshadowed by the fact that security responsibility in Basrah was transferred from the Coalition to the central, not provincial, government. END COMMENT.
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